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POEMS & ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF
J.H. PRYNNE
ON THE OCCASION
OF HIS 80TH BIRTHDAY

EDITED BY
IAN BRINTON

SHEARSMAN BOOKS
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When the first Bloodaxe edition of the Poems of J.H. Prynne appeared in 1999 it was dedicated ‘A la mémoire de Bernard Dubourg’. Dubourg had translated quite a few of Prynne’s early poems into French, most notably Poèmes de Cuisine (1975), Séquentiel Diurne I, Chansons A La Journée-Lumière (1975) and Séquentiel Diurne 2, Lézard de Feu. These collections were privately printed by Dubourg at Damazan ‘sur la presse à main du traducteur’. In 1977 the magazine Prospice 7 published some further translations which both poets had worked on, ‘Royal Fern’, ‘The Five Hindrances’, ‘Cool as a Mountain Stream’ and ‘Pigment Dépôt’. Going on to comment on the art of translation in Grosseteste Review 12, 1979, Dubourg suggested that ‘To translate is a state, not an act: the state of progression towards a final point already posited. I have often wanted to amend the original; J.H. Prynne has consented once or twice to such corrections; for the rest only dead authors are assailed.’ Dubourg concluded his article, a slightly tongue-in-cheek account to which he gave the title ‘Some Proposals: To Translate for fancy-readers’, with point 20:

As a provisional ending: to translate is to furnish yourself with the most rash resources of patience, to spend hours on a line of no greater relief than the rest, to jump feet together over another line which exacted from the author—the original—the most finical attention. To translate is in fact to be in on the syllable, and by dint of that, to make sport of the author’s own patience. No question of apeing the original: what you do is, you flit.

Writing to Anthony Barnett in November 1975 Prynne highlighted the importance to him of Dubourg’s work:
For he is a person of quite extraordinary alertness & finesse, deeply committed to the work of poetry (his own as well as mine); his care for accuracy and for strenuous understanding is quite without parallel. His insights into my texts are more complete than those of any other reader known to me, in any country or from any language. The activity of his mind is strong and completely without evasion—he has given something which approaches dedication to defining the force of my work and to giving a true carriage of it into French. This has involved me in a very great labour of co-operation, still not complete, which I cannot at all begrudge in view of the hugely greater difficulty for him than for me.

In the front of some of the 1999 Bloodaxe copies Prynne had added a hand-written comment addressed To each of those friends and promoters of remarkable, precarious and supportive production of books, making the tunes of the age to be heard while out of tune with its jingle, who has assisted some portion of this current bundle to take its place in the passage of years and here in the table of contents, I express my deepest personal thanks, remembering each of you at this moment of somewhat surprised but staunchly grateful retrospection: surprise at the way that slices of text do waymark a life, and gratitude for companionship and adventure along the way.’

When the second, expanded edition of the Poems appeared from Bloodaxe in 2005 it bore the dedication ‘For Edward Dorn his brilliant luminous shade’, words which echoed those the author had inscribed on 14 April, 1999, on the flyleaf of the copy of the earlier edition he had given to the American poet and friend:

Caro Eduardo:

I have been pining for so long to inscribe this book for you, over the protracted delays & confusions of its production; and now thankfully I can make up this parcel and send it off; thankfully because as I cast many thoughts back over our long-extended friendship and many adventures along the way I am grateful that we have shared so many of the sparks and flights that have provoked our precarious trade in exotic text, and
provided such varied points of vantage from which to squint at the razzle of nearly half a century. Well, nearly. And with the two big empty noughts up front, who knows who may care to read in our anthologies of disorder, and indeed who cares very much anyway; the life of abject slavery to the Muse has its inbuilt compulsions, as well we both know. But as to my perpetual and fundamental regard for your own intrepid practice, you will never fully know how deeply that is rooted in amazement and gratitude constantly renewed and refreshed, as the years stumble onwards and successive outbursts of poetic affront have snapped the bystanders into spasms of white-hot attention. Well, this one at any rate. All the swaps and exploits and swift entertainments make up a caravan which I now remember with profound emotion, and in that spirit I send my fondest salutes and this congealed gamut of text. Published in Australia: how about that?

On 23 April 2015, an auspicious day perhaps for a writer who had written an 86-page monograph on *Sonnet 94*, Bloodaxe produced the third edition of *Poems* which now ran to nearly 700 pages. The dedication at the front simply says ‘For the Future’ and I found myself thinking, well, that is the direction a teacher would choose.

My enduring respect for the most important teacher I have ever had has been evidenced over the years not least by my determination to give handouts to my pupils. I shall never forget the attention to detail provided in Jeremy Prynne’s handouts whether they were Practical Criticism exercises such as ‘Ode to Evening’ by William Collins, with its introductory comments, or a lengthy series of notes such as were presented to me in November 1969, ‘Some Notes on the Outlook and Procedures of the Post-Romantic Mind’.

The Collins exercise in Practical Criticism was headed ‘The following “Ode to Evening” appeared in December 1746. Try to account for its very powerful and distinctive excellence; how far does the poise of this language depend on its generality, and specifically upon its personifications? As a secondary issue, develop a comparison between this poem and John Clare’s “Syren of sullen moods and fading hues”, and with Blake’s poems to the four seasons, to the “Evening Star” and
to “Morning” (in Poetical Sketches, 1783). You might even look forward to Keats’ Ode “To Autumn’. As I look back over my copy of this sheet I note with renewed astonishment the wide range of suggested reading that my teacher offered at the supervision following on from the completion of the submitted essay: J.S. Cunningham’s Drafts & Fragments of William Collins, especially the Ode ‘To Simplicity’ and ‘Ye Genii who in secret state’; The Life of a Poet, William Collins by P.L. Carver; an essay on Collins in From Sensibility to Romanticism (Hilles & Bloom); Windows of the Morning: A critical study of William Blake’s Poetical Sketches, 1783 by M.R. Lowery; An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1767, by Adam Ferguson; ‘The Language of the Tribe’ in Donald Davie’s Purity of Diction in English Verse; The Task by William Cowper; Colour in Turner by John Gage; The Sunset Ship, Poems of J.M.W. Turner, Blake and Tradition by Kathleen Raine; Caleb Williams by William Godwin; The Young Shelley, Genesis of a Radical by K.N. Cameron; Shelley’s essay ‘On Life’ and poem ‘The Triumph of Life’. What had started at 1746 was now being pushed firmly into the nineteenth century.

The twenty-five page handout about the ‘Post-Romantic Mind’ remains with me as one of the most astonishingly fertile sets of notes I have ever received and I have used aspects of them time and again in my own school-teaching. Divided into fourteen sections they remind me of the style of Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis: a substantial quotation followed by a commentary. The fourteen begin with the Scottish philosopher Thomas Brown and move on to include, Henry Mayhew, Charles Dickens, Henry James, Matthew Arnold, G.M. Hopkins, J.H. Newman, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Joseph Conrad, Paul Valéry, W.B. Yeats, Theodore Roethke and J.V. Cunningham. The second section which focuses on Mayhew’s ‘Rag-and-Bottle Shop’ from London Labour and the London Poor is a prime example of that pushing forward which a teacher can do.

2.

I was referred to the owner of a marine-store shop, as to a respectable man, keeping a store of the best class. Here the counter, or table, or whatever it is to be called, for it was
somewhat nondescript, by an ingenious contrivance could be pushed out into the street, so that in bad weather the goods which were at other times exposed in the street could be drawn inside without trouble. The glass frames of the window were removable, and were placed on one side in the shop, for in the summer an open casement seemed to be preferred. This is one of the remaining old trade customs still seen in London; for previously to the great fire in 1666, and the subsequent rebuilding of the city, shops with open casements, and protected from the weather by overhanging eaves, or by a sloping wooden roof, were general.

The house I visited was an old one, and abounded in closets and recesses. The fire-place, which apparently had been large, was removed, and the space was occupied with a mass of old iron of every kind; all this was destined for the furnace of the iron-founder, wrought iron being preferred for several of the requirements of that trade. A chest or range of very old drawers, with defaced or wornout labels—once a grocer’s or a chemist’s—was stuffed, in every drawer, with old horse-shoe nails (valuable for steel manufacturers), and horse and donkey shoes; brass knobs; glass stoppers; small bottles (among them a number of the cheap cast “hartshorn bottles’’); broken pieces of brass and copper; small tools (such as shoemakers’ and harness-makers’ awls), punches, gimlets, plane-irons, hammer heads, &c.; odd dominoes, dice, and backgammon-men; lock escutcheons, keys, and the smaller sort of locks, especially padlocks; in fine, any small thing which could be stowed away in such a place.

In one corner of the shop had been thrown, the evening before, a mass of old iron, then just bought. It consisted of a number of screws of different lengths and substance; of broken bars and rails; of the odds and ends of the cogged wheels of machinery, broken up or worn out; of odd-looking spikes, and rings, and links; all heaped together and scarcely distinguishable. These things had all to be assorted; some to be sold for re-use in their then form; the others to be sold that they might be melted and cast into other forms. The floor
was intricate with hampers of bottles; heaps of old boots and shoes; old desks and work-boxes; pictures (all modern) with and without frames; waste-paper, the most of it of quarto, and some larger sized, soiled or torn, and strung closely together in weights of from 2 to 7 lbs.; and a fire-proof safe, stuffed with old fringes, tassels, and other upholstery goods, worn and discoloured. The miscellaneous wares were carried out into the street, and ranged by the door-posts as well as in front of the house. In some small outhouses in the yard were piles of old iron and tin pans, and of the broken or separate parts of harness.

Mayhew first began his detailed reports on the conditions of urban life and work in articles published in 1849-50 in the Morning Chronicle. It is significant that The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (first issued in monthly parts, London, 1837) came into being as the result of a commission for a humorous text to accompany a projected series of illustrations by the popular comic artist Robert Seymour, and that this commission was offered to Mayhew before Dickens was eventually approached (Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens [London, 1953], Vol. I, p. 115).

Earlier accounts of metropolitan life could not of course overlook the Hogarthian ironies of vigorous and picturesque disorder; but in the first quarter of the century these contrasts are there more simply to be looked at, rather than actually felt to induce serious epistemic or moral confusion. See for example Pierce Egan’s Life in London, in which the three picaresque men-about-town make a visit to the condemned yard of Newgate Prison; after a few perfunctory observations on the pitiable consequences of social disintegration to be seen there, “the TRIO hastily quitted the gloomy walls of Newgate, once more to join the busy hum and life of society” (p. 382). Thackeray, describing his reactions in 1860 to re-reading this passage, comments on the excellence of the plate by the brothers Cruikshank illustrating the Newgate scene, only to continue: “Now we haste away to merrier scenes: to Tattersall’s
(ah! gracious powers! what a funny fellow that actor was who performed Dicky Green in that scene at the play!); and now we are at a private party…” (“Roundabout Papers—No. VIII. De Juventate,” *Cornhill Mag.*, II [1860], p. 510. This sporting and jolly attitude to scenes from town life makes *Pickwick Papers* entirely understandable as part of the nostalgic genre, and makes the portrait of the Marshalsea Prison in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) only the more astonishingly powerful and unprepared-for.

In the attitudes to town life current in the early nineteenth century, the pattern of eighteenth-century ideas about types of experience and their attendant feelings, as belonging in generally well-defined and distinct categories, helps to insulate the spectator against the sense of pressure exerted by one set of values against another. One kind of incident is full of pathos, the other more distantly comic; no disturbing overlap is forced by the environment unless the subject is willing to entertain the connection. Thus the insatiable curiosity of the hero of William Godwin’s novel, *Caleb Williams, or, Things as They Are* (1794) leads him into misery and imprisonment, and Godwin in his descriptions of this stage of Caleb’s ‘adventures’ (Vol. II, Chaps XI-XIV) draws on the evidence of a friend’s visit to Newgate, on the *Newgate Calendar* and on *Howard on Prisons* (all cited in footnotes). Caleb’s eventual fate is almost a direct outcome of his assumption that an agile theoretic intelligence could carry him without damage through all types and levels of experience—an attitude of which Shelley was later an ardent admirer.

Early connections between the perception of grotesque disorder and profusion as the occasion for humour on the one hand, and for serious moral/liberal concern on the other, are hinted at in E.P. Thompson, “The Political Education of Henry Mayhew,” *Victorian Studies*, XI (September, 1967); see esp. pp. 51-52, 60. See also the implicit tension—still unresolved—between George Cruikshank’s relaxed and picturesque genre illustrations, and Henry Mayhew’s almost Ruskinian hopefulness about the potential dignity of human
labour, in their joint production, *1851; Or, The Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and Family, who Came up to London to Enjoy Themselves and to See the Great Exhibition* (London, [1851])—read for example the opening to Chap. XIII.

The contradictory jumble of perceptual and moral experience in Victorian town life is increasingly the consequence of a literal closeness of one thing—dwelling-house, moral code, specialised cants and styles of speech—to another. The sense of scale and moral perspective secured by the first-generation Romantic artist’s image of the self worked out in solitude and recollection is jostled out of the picture, so that what results is often either moral nonsentience (Malthus) or moral vertigo (Ruskin, the Brontës). For Dickens this condition of self and society is underlain by deep and often bitter ironies; on the one hand there is the domestic intimacy of the family huddle, while on the other there are the numerous constrained and distorted forms of life forced on those unable to master the adaptive skills required for minimum self-preservation (compare for example Edgar Johnson’s comments on what he calls “Dickens's lifelong preoccupation with prisons” [*Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, pp. 884-885 and ff.]).

The effects of urban crowding at the level of physical fact made their earliest demands for attention as especially problems of public health and sanitation; see the *First Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts* (London, 1844), esp. such evidence as that given by a private cleansing contractor or ‘scavenger’, paras. 4537-4713. The consequent mental and moral confusions are also noticed; see, e.g., the evidence of Dr T.S. Smith (paras. 908-1026) for its unexceptional but generous insight into the ‘dehumanizing’ effects of wretchedly confined living-space.

What this epistemic crowding may have entailed for the imagination, once it became an unalterable component of social consciousness and not just a condition to be observed, is more difficult to determine. But much of the spacious and leisured deployment of experience in Victorian poetry might seem by contrast to regress to a pastoral nostalgia for larger and more
amenable distances between things and experiences—where the self could hold its position as the chief axis of the personal life and where the poet could still choose his metaphors rather than have them thrust upon him by the popular press or the idiom of imitative mass-manufacture. Arnold as poet (and often also as social commentator) is very much a case in point here, as for example Thomas Hood’s “Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg” (first printed, September-November 1840 in the *New Monthly*) is very distinctively and interestingly not.

The problem is of course much less disabling for the writer of fiction, and the really startling growth in range and power of the novel during the 1840s may in part be a consequence of this. Thus we can trace the early difficulties with visual particularism (brilliantly mimed, for example, in *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1844], Chap. IX) and can follow at least one strand of the logic of objects to its by no means merely erratic conclusion: “The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold. “Things flow about so here!” she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at” (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* [London, 1872], Chap. V). On this see also William Empson, “Alice in Wonderland: the Child as Swain,” in his *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935); more generally, R.A. Forsyth, “The Victorian Self-Image and the Emergent City Sensibility,” *UTQ*, XXXIII (1963); R.A. Forsyth, “The Myth of Nature and the Victorian Compromise of the Imagination,” *ELH*, 31 (1964), 213-240; and also *ELH*, 36 (1969), 382-415.

It was a great privilege to be taught by J.H. Prynne and I am sure that I cannot be the only former pupil who still has books which he
intends to read at some point before it is too late. The privilege was being challenged by a mind that believed firmly in pressing on ‘For the Future’.